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ABSTRACT

To demonstrate the inappropriateness of fables for moral instruction at early elementary levels, a study was conducted with children from grades two, four, and six in two suburban schools on Long Island (New York). The children listened to recordings of three fables, "The Shepherd Boy and the Wolf," "The Fox and the Goat," and "The Lion and the Mouse," and responded to questions related to four dimensions of moral judgment--intentionality, relativism, punishment, and independence of sanctions. Responses showed that on each of the four dimensions studied, fewer young children gave mature responses than older children, showing that older children had a higher level of moral judgment than the younger ones. The younger children could not grasp the motivations in each of the fables: they could not see extenuating circumstances and could think of punishment as the only consequence of and deterrent for misbehavior. Responses suggested that children pass through a series of conceptually complex moral stages, and that at the second-grade level many of the concepts of moral judgment are beyond the students' grasp. While fables presented at developmentally appropriate times can propagate values, they are more suited to children older than second grade. (HTH)

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LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP: FABLES FOR THE ELEMENTARY LEVEL

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LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP: FABLES FOR THE ELEMENTARY LEVEL

Introduction

My research on dimensions of the development of moral judgment reflected in children's responses to fables stemmed from a belief that not only is literature what learning to read is all about but, that -- as David Reisman pointed out 30 years ago in The Lonely Crowd -- literature serves a great socializing function in society.

Over the years, I had noted an increasing concern in our society with helping students develop their moral judgment and a concomitant concern for educational programs to achieve this. I thought the things children were reading in school might reflect the concern, and was not surprised that an investigation of 33 basal series revealed as many as 118 fables. I knew that fables derived from an oral literary tradition aimed to teach moral lessons to adults. What were they doing in children's readers?

After several computer searches, I realized that there was no evidence of the ways in which elementary school children responded to fables. The purpose of my research became clear.

Parenthetically, I might say that public school education in the early years regarded the teaching of morals as an integral part of the educational program. We have but to examine the McGuffey Readers to see the equal importance placed on both the teaching of morals and the teaching of

reading. And we know the influence McGuffey Readers had in shaping the American mind of the mid-19th century. As recently as September 1980 "The 12th Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools" showed overwhelming support for instruction in morals and moral behavior.

Whether this should be within the domain of public education, however, is a philosophical issue inappropriate for the present discussion. What is of concern is whether or not fables are appropriate reading fare for the elementary grades. Certainly, editors of basal reading series think they are, witness the 118 fables in the examined series.

The theoretical framework for this research had two major divisions -- response to literature and moral development. The writing of Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser, Arthur Applebee, Norman Holland, and F. Andre Favat informed the former division, while the writing of Jean Piaget (in The Moral Judgment of the Child) and Lawrence Kohlberg (in studies from the Center for Moral Development and Education at Harvard University) informed the latter.

The study participants were children from grades 2, 4, and 6, in two suburban schools on Long Island. They listened to three tape-recorded fables, "The Shepherd Boy and the Wolf," "The Fox and the Goat," and "The Lion and the Mouse," and responded to questions related to four dimensions of moral judgment -- intentionality, relativism, punishment, and independence of sanctions.

Responses and the Moral Domain

Children's responses to fables reflected a model of the moral domain described by Piaget. Analysis of the data confirmed developmental trends; responses showed that on each of the four dimensions studied, fewer young children gave mature responses than older children. In addition, greater percentages of younger children gave responses at the immature level of moral judgment as compared with older children. It is precisely this finding that questions the appropriateness of using fables with students as young as those in second grade.

Unlike fairy tales which are resolved with goodness rewarded and evil punished, fables are open-ended and, as such, are troublesome for the young child who favors and is comfortable with closure and resolution. There is a lack of correspondence between the characteristics of fables and the characteristics of children at the immature level of moral development. My research suggests that the abstractions of wisdom and folly, or good and evil, personified in the short narratives are elusive to young minds which respond in only the most concrete terms. The flat, stereotypic characters used symbolically are often difficult for young children to understand.

One of my research questions required a qualitative examination of immature, mixed, and mature responses for each of the fables across the dimensions. This analysis showed the versatility children bring to an experience with literature; a richness reflecting developmental theory of moral judgment. Responses illustrated the evolution from an

immature egocentric reward and punishment orientation for the youngest participants toward a mature position that considered antecedent motives and subjective criteria in making judgments.

Immature responses were directed toward obedience, punishment, and impersonal forces, and characterized by the idea that adult-made rules are final and inviolable. The letter of the law is followed and justice is meted out by whatever the authority commands. Duty is conceived of as obeying authorities and overt consequences alone count in assessing wrongfulness of acts. Punishments for wrongdoing are harsh and expiatory intended to teach the culprit a lesson.

Mature responses, on the other hand, exemplifying children's developmentally later moral reasoning, were directed toward justice and responsibility, characterized by the idea that rules are based upon mutual respect and formed out of reciprocal relationships among status peers. Antecedent motives and intentions counted more than consequences in mature assessments of the wrongfulness of acts. Many mature responses showed that children put themselves in the role of the character. They said things like, "If I were the boy" or "If I were the fox" or "If I were the lion." Individuals began to feel from within the desire to treat others as they themselves would wish to be treated.

Intentionality: Immature and Mature Responses

Immature responses for the dimension of intentionality

revealed that children were unable to understand the shepherd boy's reasons for crying, "Wolf!" or the fox's intentions to trick the goat. When asked what the shepherd boy was thinking when he cried, "Wolf!" a typical response was:

It was a game. He was making everyone come out running.

In discussing what the fox was thinking when he told the goat that the water was so fresh, a child unable to focus on intentions said:

He said he would let him have water. The goat was really thirsty.

Immature responses considered that the fox really wanted the goat to have water and never realized that he was tricking the goat.

By contrast, mature responses for intentionality suggest that intentions count strongly in decisions of right and wrong. For example, children were able to role-take and recognized that the shepherd boy might have been bored and considered that his motives might have lacked any ill intent. They said:

He was bored and had nothing to do. Just standing there watching the sheep. He probably said, "It's going to be fun and nothing's really gonna happen."

He just wanted to have some fun because he was bored because he would probably get bored watching the sheep day after day. I would.

The responses showed that these students were looking at the situation from the point of view of the shepherd boy showing how children grow in their understanding that others may view an event differently from themselves, and that not everyone views things in the same way.

Responses that showed that children recognized the fox's intentions to trick the goat into coming down in the well also understood that the fox should have learned the lesson to "look before you leap" that he had suggested to the goat. When asked what the fox was thinking when he told the goat the water was so good, children replied:

I don't think it was as much to teach the goat a lesson as it was to get himself out of there cause the first thing he did when the goat got in was to get out. "He tried to hide his despair" sounds like he wasn't trying to teach the goat a lesson. The fox had it all planned out.

He thought, "Maybe if I tell him that the water is so delicious, I can make him thirsty and he'll want to come in with me and I can get out." The fox didn't want to be in there, that's for sure.

Mature responses recognized that the lion saw the possibility for the mouse helping him in some way someday; children understood that the mouse had good intentions and meant no harm.

They said:

The lion felt sorry for the mouse and thought that someday the mouse really could help him. And even if he couldn't he thought, "Maybe he can't but I'll let him go anyway because all he did was wake me up from sleep anyway. He didn't do anything else."

The lion thought, "Let him go free. I'm sure I could kill him if I wanted to he's a little thing. I'm not going to prove anything by killing him." He's big the lion. If he wanted to prove anything he'd go to a giraffe, a zebra. Something that he could show people he did something to.

Mature responses revealed that children considered antecedent motives for an act more important than an act's consequences. The tendency to include dialogue regarding what a particular character was thinking is a marker of mature responses.

Relativism: Immature and Mature Responses

Regarding relativism, we know that young children view acts as either totally right or totally wrong and are unable to see extenuating circumstances. They cannot entertain the possibility of alternative points of view. So, the shepherd boy was totally wrong for his misdeed and the actual physical consequences, the dead sheep, were proof of his misdemeanor. One child said:

All the sheep died. He felt sad because the townspeople got angry at him and had to leave their jobs.

The most frequent reasons for tricking being wrong in the fox's case were that it is not nice, you could get punished, and no one would like you. One child said:

Wrong. You're not supposed to fool people because they would fall down and it isn't nice.

When asked whether the lion was right or wrong not to eat the mouse, most immature responses suggested that the lion was right because had he done that, the mouse would not have been around at the end to gnaw him out of the hunter's trap. Once again, they focused on consequences in assessing an act. Those who said that the lion was wrong and should have eaten the mouse said that the mouse had disturbed the lion and deserved it. They did not notice that the mouse meant no ill toward the lion or that it could have been an accident. Typical responses were:

The lion was right. If he got trapped after he ate the mouse then the mouse couldn't have helped let him go, get him out.

Wrong because he should have ate him for disturbing his sleep.

As children develop and mature, the rigidity that characterizes their thinking is replaced by a more flexible attitude which acknowledges the existence of diverse views. When children were asked whether the shepherd boy was right or wrong to cry "Wolf!" mature responses suggested that he could have been both right and wrong.

A little of both because he was bored. But he should have found something else to do. He could have got hurt, too.

At the mature level of moral development, children thought that the fox, too, could have been both right and wrong for tricking the goat. They understood the fox's plight and his not wanting to stay in the well, but also believed that he could have asked for a ladder or rope and told the truth about falling in himself.

Half wrong and half right. He was wrong because he should not have done it, trick the goat. It was sort of right and sort of wrong. He wanted to get out.

He did it because he wanted to get out, but he could have told the truth and the goat would have probably got something to help him and he wouldn't have to trick the goat.

Asked if the lion was right or wrong not to eat the mouse, mature responses suggested that the mouse did not mean to run over the lion's face. Too, the lion should consider the mouse's intentions before doing anything. The only acceptable reason for eating the mouse was to preserve the balance of nature. Some responses were:

He was right and wrong because he has to preserve the balance of nature. Without doing that there might be an overflow of mice. And he was right to let him go because the mouse really didn't do anything to him except wake him up.

In the animal world it doesn't matter whether you eat him or not. Somehow you have to eat to survive. It would not have been wrong if he ate him. He has to survive some way and we go around killing cattle to eat. It's the same as the lion killing the mouse.

Punishment: Immature and Mature Responses

As for the dimension of punishment, Piaget's theory describes the importance young children place on harsh and painful punishment essential as a preventive measure for future misconduct. Immature responses indicated that the shepherd boy had been bad and needed to be punished so he would not lie again. Asked how he should be punished, some children said:

Smack him with the hand.

Give him a licking because he was a bad boy.

Put him in prison.

Keep him in for two weeks to give him time to think about what he did before he does anything else.

The fox, too, should be punished in the same manner for his tricking. Among the immature responses designed to teach the fox his lesson were:

Take my hand and smack him because of what he did.

Keeping him in his den for a few days so he knows not to trick again.

Put him in a stock. Then he will not be able to get out. A stock where only his head stuck out so it would be too heavy to get out.

I'd kick him and spank him.

When asked what the punishment would be had the lion eaten the mouse, responses reflected the same moral structures that were apparent for the shepherd boy and the fox stories.

I wouldn't use my hands. I'd use a long stick and smack him cause if I used my hands, he would bite my hands.

I'd punish him cause it's not nice to eat people.

Keep him in a trap for a day cause he shouldn't eat the mouse. Teaches him a lesson.

Instead of running free, I'd put him in a zoo. I'd cage him because he did something wrong.

The responses cited illustrate how children's immature notions about punishment were consistent in structure across the three fables. Young children do unto others in a painful and harsh way; an eye for an eye morality prevails. They believe that punishment is just and necessary, that is, the idea of expiation is bound to the idea of preventing a relapse.

In contrast, the older children are more in favor of the measures of reciprocity which serve to make the culprit feel that the bond of solidarity has been severed and that things must be put right again. Censure, reproach, and explanation tempered mature responses in which attenuating circumstances were considered when referring to the shepherd boy. Asked how to punish him, a child replied:

Just ignore him for a couple of weeks. They had paid too much attention to him when he cried, "Wolf!" Maybe if nobody talked to him he'd get okay.

Concerning the fox's trickery, responses at a mature level did not recommend punishment. They realized there really was not any harm done and that part of the blame was the goat's. Censure, in the form of avoidance, would be appropriate treatment for the fox. One child said:

I would scold him, but would not punish him that much. In a way he was kinda right because he wanted to get out and didn't leave the goat stranded.

With development comes an increasing awareness that "it was only a story." For children at this level, you cannot punish lions (or foxes, for that matter). There were, however, children who suspended disbelief and addressed punishment despite this mature understanding. Children who would not have punished the lion if he had eaten the mouse cited the uselessness of punishment, the law of the jungle, and the matter of survival. They recognized the rights of the mouse.

One said:

I wouldn't punish him because that's the balance of nature. From that one mouse more mice would be born and be too heavily populated. And they'd eat all the food and there wouldn't be any left for other animals.

I wouldn't punish him because he has to eat to live. What is he supposed to do, starve to death?

The value of punishment counts for little in mature responses. A more useful end is in making the transgressor realize how she/he has broken the bond of solidarity. Piaget has suggested that younger children believe harsh punishment a preventive for relapses whereas the older ones hold that a child to whom, even without a punishment, the consequences of actions have been thoroughly explained is less likely to begin again than if punished and nothing more.

Independence of Sanctions: Immature and Mature Responses

With regard to independence of sanctions, we know that young children believe an act is bad because it will elicit punishment. When asked why the shepherd boy should not lie, most responses reflected the idea that such behavior

could result in punishment, one could get in trouble, or even lose friends. For children at this immature stage, rules define what is forbidden and punishable. They are an obligatory and untouchable reality whose rightness derives from the powerful persons doing the punishing and forbidding. The reason most frequently invoked is that you must not tell lies because you get punished. Among children's frequent comments for not lying were:

Cause when you do you get in trouble.

He could get in big trouble and lying isn't very good. That's very bad.

When asked why people should not fool each other, as the fox did the goat, immature responses cited getting into trouble and losing friends, once again. They stressed the consequences of not following a rule. Some children said:

Then they'll get mad at each other.

It's not nice to trick. Someone might think it's the other person and the person that did trick him will get into trouble.

It could lead to big trouble like starting a fight. Nasty tricks going on.

When asked why people should not harm each other for "The Lion and the Mouse" fable, responses were governed by similar kinds of constructs. Children said it was not nice to harm people because you could get in trouble, there would be less people around, or you could lose friends. Typical responses were:

It isn't nice and you could lose friends and you could get punished.

The teacher will holler at you.

Responses about the moral dimension independence of sanctions echo children's fear of punishment, their respect for adult authority, and the importance of consequences in making judgments, seen in the afore-mentioned examples. By contrast, Piaget has suggested that the reasons older children invoke against lying is that truthfulness is necessary because deceiving others destroys mutual trust. To lie is contrary to reciprocity and mutual respect. In "The Shepherd Boy and the Wolf" interview, mature responses for why people should not lie stressed honesty as a recognition of others' rights and feelings. No longer did children act out of fear of punishment; rather the importance of life was valued in their responses. One child said:

You could get people hurt and that's what causes you to die in a way. If he hadn't cried, "Wolf!" the first two times, then the people would have come and the sheep would have been saved. Lying causes unhappiness and you can hurt and upset people sometimes.

Mature children understood that acts that violate rules or harm others are wrong. When asked why people should not fool each other as the fox did the goat, responses reflected the notion that a breach of mutual trust was unacceptable. Some said:

It's not right. Someone could get hurt. The goat could have broken his leg going into the well.

It's not right. The same thing as lying. People get hurt in the end.

The question used to probe independence of sanctions in "The Lion and the Mouse" was: Why shouldn't people harm each other? Here, too, mature responses showed children

beginning to reason with an understanding of the mutual respect and solidarity among friends that Piaget described. They talked about the role of one's conscience making a distinction between self-defense, or survival, and harming out of ill intentions. Some said:

It's not right to do, but if you have to you have to survive. If you don't need something, you shouldn't harm it, but you've got to survive. It depends on things.

If you could just talk things over, or discuss it and get your feelings out, then it could be worked out and harming won't be in it.

These examples for each of the four dimensions across the differing content of all three fables, show how children's mature responses consider alternative points of view and how to apply them to people in different situations. The growth in moral judgment can be seen in this change of attitudes toward rules. No longer do children reason from fear of rigid, external authority. Rather, they reason flexibly, entertaining diverse ideas, while basing judgments on social considerations.

Concluding Remarks

The nature of children's responses indicates that the moral reasoning structure of their concerns was similar across all three fables, within each of the four dimensions investigated. Responses show that children pass through a series of conceptually complex moral stages paralleling those described by Piaget. Immature pronouncements of a moral nature were based upon respect for adult authority; good behavior is constituted through conformity to adult-made rules. Children are disposed to judge guilt on the

basis of the material consequences of an act. Before children could consider intentions, consequences and damage done dominated their decisions.

Higher levels of moral reasoning required the ability to understand what another person might be thinking and feeling. Time and again, children who gave mature responses judged actions according to intentions as opposed to outcomes. The presence of these distinct moral attitudes could be clearly seen.

Once children have learned to read, the problem for teachers becomes one of match--finding literature that is sufficiently stimulating, but not too demanding, for readers at each point in their development. Response to literature research assists teachers in making informed choices. Finding the right match is facilitated when teachers understand the nature of specific responses evoked when children read.

It is apparent from responses to fables that this traditional prose form can be used to elicit judgments about the concerns of responsibility and blame, including what determines a bad action, the extent of obligation to others, and the ways to deal with wrongdoing. Since responses reflected developmental trends, it would seem that fables could be presented at developmentally appropriate times in the literature curriculum where they could best be understood in terms of their traditional intent. It is not unreasonable to see literature serve as a propagator of values at the same time it fulfills aesthetic purposes.

The findings of this research indicate that fables are a more appropriate match for some age groups than for others, and question the use of fables with children as young as those in second grade.

Rousseau (1762/1974), in his famous educational treatise Emile, strongly contends that fables are inappropriate for children. He says:

I maintain that the child does not understand the fables he is taught, for however you try to explain them, the teaching you wish to extract from them demands ideas which he cannot grasp. (p. 77)

As to my pupil, permit me to prevent him studying any one of them till you have convinced me that it is good for him to learn things three-fourths of which are unintelligible to him, and until you can convince me that in those fables he can understand he will never reverse the order and imitate the villain instead of taking warning from his dupe. (p. 80)

Although the fables used in this study successfully elicited responses on moral dimensions, it is certain that the youngest children understood them from an immature perspective, unable to grasp the more subtle and generalizable aspects the older children grasped. It is doubtful that complexities such as cupidity and pride are comprehensible to young readers. By contrast, the responses of older children showed a better understanding that the personifications in fables illustrated larger human qualities. It would seem that fables were better suited for this age group.

A love of reading builds with the rewarding experiences children have, and their responses indicate the nature of the interaction. In order to maximize response, that is, to enable children to read in the richest possible way, teachers need to take into account children's interests as well as their

developmental needs. This relates to the when and the how we share the what of our literary heritage. When it comes to fables at the elementary school level, I can only say, "Look before you leap!"